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In Conversation with Peter McDonald

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INTERVIEW WITH PETER MCDONALD

Fran Brearton

There's a poem which opens your first collection, Biting the Wax (1989), called 'The Dog', about the Northern Irish Troubles – the violence outside on the streets, the fear and darkness inside a house under threat. What appears often in the poems as your childhood 'normality' is, of course, for many of your readers, incomprehensible. Can you say something about growing up in the Belfast of the 1970s?

Yes, that poem opens the *Collected* now. I'm not sure that I ever thought of it as a poem 'about' the Troubles – but it does, I suppose, have a lot of the Troubles in it. The whole thing was meant to have a strongly surrealist tinge, though, rather than a documentary one. I suspect that, at the time of that first book – which was being written, in fact, from about 1982 onwards – I regarded the surreal as about as close as I could come to a straightforward report on things. In terms of the Troubles, everything *was* surreal, or seemed so to me, anyway. It took years for my poetry to attempt something more directly first-hand.

The last image in 'The Dog' is of a helicopter, and it's true that you do see a lot of helicopters in the skies of 'Troubles' poems, so much so that they achieve something like cliché status there. Mine had a blade missing, to mirror a three-legged dead dog, and the point was meant to be a bit unclear, a bit perplexing. Normality was all wrong. I'm not sure if that's entirely 'incomprehensible' now – actually, I suspect there are parallel situations here and there. The skies of Belfast did seem to be full of helicopters, though; even if they weren't actually training cameras at you – and occasionally, they really were – it still felt like being under surveillance in a slightly creepy way, as I remember.

'Incomprehensible' may be too strong. But I notice, teaching contemporary Irish poetry to students in Belfast now, that they are fascinated by what was for their elders a 'normality' for three decades, but is something remote from their own experience, even while they are reading poems set in known, familiar locations, where the particular town, or even street resonates....

I know, and of course all writing recedes from 'experience' in the end, one way or another. That poem is set in a very specific place – the same place, in fact, where a number of poems I wrote much later on were also set, and where my imagination still spends a certain amount of time: it's a ground floor council flat in the Braniel (a housing estate to the east of Belfast), where my parents and I lived from when I was about two years old until I was twelve or thirteen. It was on one corner of a cul-de-sac, and a number of kids of about my age lived there. Our friendships and feuds were utterly normal, but they were increasingly in an abnormal context. I mean, I can see it as an abnormal context now, but it seemed nothing of the kind to me then. The Troubles were getting properly underway by the time I was seven, and at that point

the working class Protestant identity of the Braniel started to really mean something. At that age, I found it all tremendously exciting, I think: I remember absorbing (to my parents' horror, let it be said) a lot of sectarian poison in those days. I was able to shout a lot of ugly things before I had any idea of what they meant.

The main thing to say is that by 1970 or so I was very much a child of the loyalist hard core, in terms of the cultural and political prejudices I was learning to share. We were all very cut off, really: the Braniel could be literally sealed off (and was so occasionally, when groups of vigilantes manned barricades at entry and exit points to the estate), and we children felt the Troubles were going on outside – in town, and on the TV. Inside, we were all safe, and certain. In fact, that was all a toxic illusion. It was the one time in my life when I really did possess that fabled thing, a strong and coherent cultural identity. I very much doubt whether I had ever met a Catholic – certainly not a Catholic child – until I was a teenager. Catholics might as well have been Martians. All of which seems to me now quite dreadful, disgraceful really, but was just normal at that time and in that place.

To get back to 'The Dog', there was of course violence in the air. I learned much later that one neighbour, who lived a blamelessly normal existence when he was in the Braniel, was a sectarian murderer when he was out of it; and paramilitaries were visible, in all sorts of ways. I remember things as getting more threatening with the passing of time, but in fact I expect I was just growing up, and noticing and thinking more about that situation. Had I stayed there into my teens, I would undoubtedly have run into hard choices about committing myself – or, just as scary, *not* committing myself – to the gangs that, in their turn, fed into the UDA and UVF. Looking back, I feel mainly a kind of helpless, horrified sympathy for the fears and anxieties my parents must have suffered on my account. But in fact things took a very different turn, and my family very quickly became a target for just those gangs. It's there, I would say, that 'The Dog' comes in, as a poem. My father (who was never part of the prevailing cultural climate there, and whose deepest affiliations were elsewhere altogether) offended the local paramilitaries by insisting on going to work during the Ulster Workers' Strike; he 'was seen' (to use that deadly, laconic phrase of the time); and for about a year after that my family was – great Ulster word of the 1970s – 'intimidated' (petrol bombs through the letterbox, nightly blatterings on the windows, nasty things left on the path, gruesomely detailed physical threats, and the like) until eventually the new Housing Executive rehoused us in town, just off the Lisburn Road. 'The Dog' owes everything to my last year in the Braniel: it's a poem about being 'put out', if you like.

To keep it at the start of your Collected Poems is to make a 'statement' about its significance too (when one thinks of other 'first poems' that retain that position)?

Reading the poem now, I see it as an important starting-point: my poetry begins with a separation from something – not from a family, but from a larger community than that, and I suppose from all the certainties of 'belonging', or whatever you'd want to call it. Mind you, 'belonging' is an absurdly fetishized concept in general. And I can see that 'You're not wanted here' is in fact not a bad place for any poetry to start – poetry should presume hostility from the world, and not set out to seek acceptance there; but humanly speaking, I dare say it's damaging, and I've no doubt that it left me damaged in certain ways. In weaker moments, I'm still a walking persecution

complex; I'm easily frightened by trivial things. Of course really, compared to what some of my generation went through, all this is chicken-feed, and I do feel culpably presumptuous and self-regarding even talking about it.

Are your east Belfast suburbs very different from Mahon's 'Glengormley', a poem he didn't put 'first', but which has survived through many reinventions of the self? Are they too, as he once claimed of his own urban experience, left out of the story of Irish poetry?

It took a long time for all kinds of suburb to find places in poetry, though, and not just in Ireland. Larkin was significant in that sense, but you could argue he got the impetus from MacNeice; and it's MacNeice's Birmingham, I think, that feeds into Mahon's Glengormley. New suburbs are being added all the time, too: in Ireland, Justin Quinn has managed to create two, with his youthful Dublin and adult Prague. When I was a teenager – and before I'd read any Mahon, as far as I know – I wrote a little poem called 'Suburbs', which won a prize in fact: it was able to take the suburban for granted by then as a legitimate subject.

So what are the McDonald suburbs, then?

You see, I have more than one suburb: on the one hand, there's the Braniel; but on the other – in fact, less than a mile up the road – there's Gilnahirk. This second place has always been every bit as important to me, imaginatively, at any rate, as the first. My mother was born in Gilnahirk, and grew up there; partly for that reason, I went there to primary school, and I had a very much deeper sense of it always than I had of the Braniel, where I was living. It was very different – and I realise now that much of that difference was in fact one of social class, or maybe 'country' rather than 'town'. Anyhow, none of that meant anything to me as a child, but from very early on I did like the place, and knew parts of it intimately. When I was very small, my Aunt Ruby used to take care of me on work days, and the little labourers' cottage she lived in, just above the main Gilnahirk Road, was for a time my second home. It had a glorious – award-winning – garden, lovingly created by my Uncle James; where that ended, there was a glen, much overgrown, which I used to explore. I always felt very much a part of the place – in a funny way, I still do. My mother's family went back a fair time in Gilnahirk – the Boyds, and the Moores – and I absorbed a lot of local history that way; I went to church and Sunday school there; and it pleases me that there will be room for me one day in the family grave at Gilnahirk Church. But yes, it is certainly a suburb now; when I was a child, it all felt closer to countryside, or certainly in touch with the farms and unbuilt-over places around it. Over the fields, a few miles distant, you could always see Stormont, this stark, classical, out-of-place thing. A whited sepulchre, with hindsight. When I write about Gilnahirk, it's not as a suburb, but as somewhere where I could feel the pulse of a less imposed-upon way of doing things – in a way, an old Ulster, a semi-rural labourers' environment, where I could be comfortable. It was still a Protestant and therefore a loyalist place, of course – very much so, indeed; but not part of the violent, street-fighting urban culture which had been transplanted from the back-streets of the Newtownards Road into the Braniel. My family from there had roots in a kind of poverty – not farmers, but labourers – but were well-off in other senses: strict but kindly religious people, hard workers, believers in virtue and dignity; their society was the Church, the Orange Lodge, the

Pipe Band, and it was a good society. Historically, it has been woefully misunderstood, and wilfully misrepresented; but I would still be entirely ready to stick up for it. It was doomed, too, as we know – but as I was hardly to realise, at that age. Now, in terms of Irish poetry that kind of place has, I think, been a bit ‘left out’ – though that wouldn’t have bothered it a bit, and it’s hard to see how much it matters. It’s not poetry’s business to go around looking for things to ‘include’, anyway. Inclusiveness as a value in itself – aesthetic or otherwise – is just cant. Perhaps it’s like what Housman said of accuracy: it’s a duty, not a virtue. But I think I might have gone some way towards including Gilnahirk, don’t you? I’ve tried at least.

Yes, it’s something - an experience, a place - I’ve not found anywhere else in Irish poetry. Perhaps not as media-sexy as Carson’s Falls Rd or Heaney’s Co. Derry farm, but not as susceptible to easy sentiment. I’m thinking of the end of an early poem, ‘The green grassy slopes of the Boyne’ where you posit ‘alternatively / the Braniel Housing Estate’) - and where you ‘turn around and go back, and around and back again’. How do you feel about your ‘place of origin’? Where is home? Is Oxford a form of exile?

Origin’s where I come from; home’s where I live, and my children live; Oxford’s a place I work in. The Government of Great Britain has not forced me to leave the country and go into exile. It’s really just that simple: no theories required. All these words – ‘origin’, ‘home’, ‘exile’ – have been very seriously abused over the years. There’s a limit, I think, to what words can go through and survive, and these particular words strike me as being very close now to the end of the line – intellectually, artistically. Sloppy thinking, like poor art, likes to lean on them. That there has been specifically literary abuse of the words is quite certain: they have all been used for special pleading of one kind or another, and I have no intention of protracting their suffering.

Although, as a critic, you’ve written about them too. Is that partly a working out of what those terms mean to you, or is that you’ve seen them as remote from your own experience, as pertinent to an earlier generation?

In terms of writing poetry, I do think I’m relatively uncomplicated in relation to what you’re talking about here: I’m a Northern Irish poet – that conditions the language I use, and the rhythms and cadences, the shapes of sound, which I hope make the poetry work. I’ve lived in England for more than thirty years, but that means my experiences there have been adult ones, and therefore not what you might call formative. In poetry, formative experience is nearly everything: it’s not just the imaginative fuel of a lifetime’s thinking and writing, but the definitive test and conditioning of the poetry’s voice. If a poem doesn’t ring true when I read it to myself – and I read poetry with the accent, speed, and intonations of speech I heard all around me as a child – then that poem simply isn’t true. It has to go.

‘Voice’ is one thing; though it isn’t the whole of what can be identified or placed?

Undoubtedly, my ‘intellectual life’, if that’s the phrase, is significantly English (I’d rather say ‘British’, but that perhaps confuses the issues here). I’d like to be able to claim that I have something to offer to Northern Irish culture, and that I’ve contributed in a positive way to various kinds of discussion there; but whether I have

or not isn't really for me to say. Michael Longley – who has always had a way of putting things bluntly – said to me recently, after I had been banging on about being overlooked locally, I expect – 'You're an Irish poet or you're nothing.' And I think that's how it is: now, it may be that, ultimately, I'm 'nothing' as a poet – I no more know the answer to that than anyone else; but in so far as I'm a poet at all, I'm an Irish one. Does that make sense?

It makes sense, yes. But it suggests being an 'Irish poet' is still important even though you left Ireland a long time ago - and are now living and working in Oxford.

Well, I haven't actually lived in Oxford for a long time, and since returning there professionally in 1999 I have lived in Oxfordshire – a completely different proposition. I take very little to do with a lot of the things the word 'Oxford' tends to conjure up, and many of those things are, in any case, more mythical than real. Most people I work with – and nearly all of the students I meet – are very pleasant, and from all over the place; the great thing about most of them is how little they have in common, apart from a fundamental commitment to intellectual effort. Of course, I occupy a very odd professional *niche* in Oxford, as a specialist in poetry's study and promotion in an institution that's half College and half Church of England Cathedral, and which was, within living memory though very definitely not nowadays, a hotbed of the most flagrant upper-class educational privilege; and I've had to have dealings with some characters every bit as mad, venal, snobby and vicious as anything you'd find in *Barchester Towers*: but these are comic figures in the end, and hardly worth worrying about. I've encountered enough of the petty spite – and, just once or twice, the casual racism – of the English upper classes to know that it's a poor thing, a kind of pathetic last gasp. Finally comic, as I say. Of course, it's entirely possible that I've become another kind of comic Oxford grotesque myself: perhaps so. But really I'm not English; and in the end all this is an English problem which I'm sure time will sort out to the satisfaction of all concerned. 'Oxford' has moved on already, and is much the better for it.

Return and departure, and the relation between present and past, is inherent in your forms – in lineation, repetitions, stanzaic shapes, but notably in an inventive, often complex rhyme. Is rhyming compulsive or instinctive? A conscious choice? A deliberate formal challenge you set yourself in particular poems (I'm thinking of recent poems from Torchlight which are cross-rhymed or in rhyming couplets)?

There's no such thing as poetry without form, so it would be foolish for me to say that I'm very much a 'formal' poet. While I'm at it, though, just let me say that I hate hearing myself (or anyone else) described as a 'formalist', whether in poetry or in critical opinions about poetry: anyone who thinks their poetry is somehow above the demands of poetic form, or endlessly free to reshape those demands at whim, may I suppose be some kind of a writer, but isn't a poet. 'Formalist' is just another word for poet.

OK: so, tell me about rhyme, then.

Rhyme is very important to my poetry – but that seems to me a completely basic starting point: it's no badge of virtue, either, for rhyme has been as crucial to bad

poetry as to good over the years. But yes, this is an instinctive business: I didn't somehow *decide* that rhyme was important to English poetry, and that it might be a good idea to try my hand at it. Having said that, I'm aware that my poems – increasingly, over the last decade and more – have gravitated towards more demanding kinds of rhyming arrangement, and that is of course after a certain point a matter of intellectual choice and determination. I say after a certain point, because in my experience the sound of a line, then a group of lines, comes before anything you could call the 'planning' of a poem takes place. Sometimes, I present myself that way with lines in a pattern that I recognise as having a certain potential – but it's a matter of hard work to fulfil the potential, and make a poem out of what I have. It can't be rushed, for the initial music needs to prolong itself, and generate variations on itself, in a way that I (and with luck, a reader) can feel to be more or less natural. My ear is attuned to the slightly low-key – in diction, I think, as much as in rhythm and rhyme – but I do go to some lengths to avoid obvious rhymes, or loud sound-effects associated with them.

It's something I know you've thought about a lot - and have a book on the subject [Sound Intentions]. If you've 'written the book', so to speak, does it make it harder to do the deed? Are you more self-conscious about your own practice?

I have thought a lot about rhyme, yes, one way or another. To write a book on rhyme took me the best part of twenty years, and that book is now published at last, much to my relief. (Let me add that I was writing other books over that period, so I wasn't as idle as that might sound: but the rhyme study kept getting stuck, as the issues it posed became harder and harder for me.) Essentially, the book is all about choice and determination. Those are important words for me in terms of my own poetry, and words fraught with history and complexity too. Although I hope that book might have some value, at least, for academic criticism of people like Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson, it's also secretly a book about how I write poetry, and why I write the kind of poetry I do. I didn't fully see that while I was working on it, which is probably just as well. Not that a single word passes my lips on anything after Thomas Hardy; but my views on the poetry of my own time are written between the lines, as it were. The whole thing is my reply to the kinds of inane poetry-chat that can issue in statements like 'Well, of course I think it's very hard to use rhyme well in modern poetry...', or even (unforgivably!) 'Oh no, I don't use rhyme in my own poetry' – no good poet *uses* rhyme, any more than a human being *uses* the air. The real problem, the real challenge which most poets in fact fail, is in not being *used by* rhyme. Anyhow, *Sound Intentions* is in that respect I suppose an artistic confession of faith as well as a book of literary criticism.

The phrase you just used, 'choice and determination', sounds like Paul Muldoon on structure and serendipity...

It does; and you could certainly talk about Paul's own work in those terms. I think, though, that his terms are more rigid than mine – at least, the happiness of the accidents that 'serendipity' covers is more than balanced by the grimness of his sense of 'structure'. Especially in his later work, the structures are very menacing – they're all-imposing, really, in a way that leaves some of the poetry feeling too much imposed upon. There's a kind of poetic Calvinism in there somewhere, and I have no idea where it comes from. I think my take on the whole thing is a bit more relaxed, a little

more hopeful maybe. I believe that 'determination' looks two ways – it faces into what Paul means by 'structure', and what his structures mean, as determinism; but it also allows for the will, the ability to be determined about confronting what determinism wants to serve up to us. A choice that's constrained is still a choice. Poetry and life aren't just two manifestations of the same done deal.

In one of your critical books, Serious Poetry, you talk of the tendency to push 'personality' in promoting contemporary poetry, at the expense of what really matters – poetic form. Should poets eschew interviews therefore?

Yes! I'm only doing this one because I'm fifty now, and haven't any right to assume I'll live long enough to spout the wisdom of old age. 'Personality' is claptrap in poetry, completely and in every case where it's identified, courted, or adduced. That's probably why it's so successful as a commodity – it's the easy thing: easy to generate to order, easy to talk about, easy to celebrate, easy to deplore...

'Easy' seems to have a very negative value in your own critical vocabulary; maybe it comes just a bit too easily itself there?

Look, I've nothing against easiness as such, and I do believe that even the very greatest poetry is, in some ways, profoundly simple. At the same time, its simplicity can present us with the most staggering difficulties. But a media-led notion of ease of access in art is, I seriously believe, utterly fatal; and all the media really understands about writing is the value of certain simple and repeatable kinds of 'personality'. But good poetry should chill you to the bone, not say 'Hi!' and welcome you in out of the cold. Its loneliness is profound, and its very nature is, I would say, both estranging and self-estranged. I could go on... I know, I know, I *do* go on, don't I, about this subject?

Go on...

In my own defence, I'd say that this is because I care very much about the consequences of the great erosion in literary sensibility which modern fetishizing of the 'accessible' and the 'relevant' in favour of 'personality' represents. The damage done is real, and permanent; it impoverishes discourse, it cramps the movement and freedom of intelligence, and it eases the path of cynicism, opportunism, and untruth in the society we all share. I'm prepared to accept that this is a subject where I'm not presently on the winning side. I do accept it; I accept that one consequence must be that my poor old poetic ego will just have to put up with not being fed. But no, 'personality' isn't something good poetry can fix its ambitions on; and the success – for a time – of palpably bad poetry, replete with acceptable 'personality', isn't an argument against the kinds of thing I'm saying here.

If it chills you to the bone - good poetry I mean - what makes the 'good poem'? 'Chills' is suggestive. Robert Graves agreed with Housman that the true poem was one which made 'the hairs of one's chin bristle...while shaving', though he felt Housman never quite explained why they should do so. Perhaps Graves didn't explain it either, though he tried...

Housman is a great poet, in my view, whose views about poetry (though he announced extreme diffidence about them) need to be taken very seriously. I think Graves was thrilled to find Housman, very much his opposite as a classicist, and in terms of both volume and expressive range his opposite as a poet too, on his side there – on the side of the White Goddess, really – in acknowledging the presence of the inexplicable in poetry. It is physical, they both mean to imply, as much as it is more than physical; it's both unearthly, and really there. Yeats knew this as the daemonic. If it possesses a 'personality' at all, you cannot know it, and it certainly does not have your own. All this, you feel as much as know. Geoffrey Hill talks about it in terms of being brushed past in the dark by something cold and alien. If that's something to believe in, then I should admit that I believe in it too. It has been my experience of poetry, and I cannot explain it away.

You've never been reluctant to express some incisive, and controversial, views about the contemporary poetry scene – 'poetries' replacing 'poetry', a critical pandering to the zeitgeist, the 'democratic voice' calling the tune.

Well, I *have* in fact been reluctant, on some occasions – too reluctant, maybe. But you're probably right that I'm known – insofar as I'm known at all – as somebody who says unhelpful things about contemporary poetry. Not a team player. I could complain at length about how unfair that is – I've published far, far more appreciation than I have deprecation of poetry – but I have to accept the fact that I'm seen as (at best) a grump and (at worst) a wrecker. In one way, I find all that extremely funny: I mean, there are people I have never met who regard me as some kind of monster – 'This man has never read my poetry, but I know that he would hate it if he did: well, if that's what he thinks of me, I certainly *loathe* him and all his works' – and it's all totally mad and delusional, as far as I can see.

I think this takes us back to that fraudulent but widespread dogma about the connection between poems and 'personality'. For nine out of ten people, it's now a case of 'Like my poems and you like me: and I'm a pretty likeable person, so my poems must be good.' People hold to this false logic with a kind of medieval religious zeal. And that is sometimes exactly the right metaphor for what's going on: I can say this feelingly, having once been the victim of a species of organised witch-hunt in the British poetry world: hate-mail, lies spread all over the internet, poison-pen letters to my employers, the lot. In a way, I was being accused of heresy. Once the heat was really turned up, though, I had no one to defend me in public. Hardly a soul: even some old friends preferred to keep well back from what they saw going on in the trenches, as it were. Well, I survived – came out of it all the stronger, I think; but I learned many important lessons as a result. I know, for instance, that nobody will risk their own prospects when the bullies really get going; that, critically speaking, I'm out on my own here; and that the British poetry 'scene' really is about keeping up a consensus, and not saying anything when old X publishes another dud volume, or Y decides poetry is the new snake-oil. Fine. I'll leave the schmoozing to others, who probably need it.

Maybe the issue now is not 'Poetry and personality' but 'Poetry and Professionalism'?

Or Professorialism, indeed. Yes, I would agree that's so. Britain is now full of poets suddenly made academics, and universities who think (cynically) they can make a fast

buck out of them. That one can't go on forever, though: and eventually bubbles like these will burst. The universities will be able to survive, but I'm not so sure about all those poets. I am not a 'professional' poet, and indeed I would quarrel with that word if it were taken to confer some degree of accredited competence, or fitness to practise. If I'm a poet at all, it's when I'm writing poetry; the idea that a poet is someone who brings his or her poet-ness into every corner of life – whether as an attempt at glamour and self-aggrandizement, or as an excuse for indolence and bad behaviour – fills me with the same kind of disdain and disgust that any reasonable person would feel. The public are right on that one. I won't apologize for taking a certain amount of pride in being an accountable scholar and literary critic, and a teacher of literature: I have worked very hard in that discipline and that career, and think it's worth working hard at.

In terms of personal preference, what do you most admire in poetry publication over, say, the last decade? What do you most dislike?

A decade is a very, very short time in poetry: there's not going to be all that much worth liking – or even worth disliking – in ten years. And people do tend to answer questions like these as though they were armchair publishers, dispensing a bogus professional wisdom where it's really neither needed nor wanted. I'm not a publisher, so I feel free not to have an opinion. Naturally, I know the things I like and dislike; I like good new poems – many of which come from older poets, I find – and I dislike bad new poetry – of which there is far, far too much. There always has been, as you might very fairly point out; but, as I've said already, and at the risk of sounding like some crank who writes letters to the *Daily Mail*, now I believe this does our society minute but appreciable harm, and I do feel angry when public money is spent on its encouragement. There go my chances of an Arts Council appointment, eh? Though if they made me Chair I could do a good job of cutting the budget appreciably, I can tell you.

'Northern Irish poetry' is often talked of (however simplistic it may be) in terms of generations – Heaney, Mahon and Longley, publishing first in the 1960s; then Muldoon, Carson and McGuckian, whose voices emerge in the early years of the Troubles. More recently, there's talk of a 'post-Ceasefire generation' – Gillis, Flynn, Morrissey – poets whose first collections coincide with a new era, and a new century. Do you take a certain pleasure in flying by the nets of these groupings? Is yours an experience of Northern Ireland that has tended to be overlooked?

I don't think that talking in terms of those groupings is necessarily unhelpful, as a matter of fact; at least, to me it seems to make a certain critical sense, and can explain relations between the poets quite well. I don't see myself as much of a Stephen Dedalus, though, and flying by nets always strikes me as too close to special pleading, in some ways. I'm quite certain that I would sound – at the very *least* – a bit of a whinger if I complained that my own poetry had somehow fallen out of sight between one generation and another! But for what it's worth, and I suppose for the sake of historical accuracy, the mid-1980s to the early 1990s did see the publication of a number of Northern Irish poets of my generation, who I think had some things in common. They didn't all keep writing poetry, or at any rate some of them stopped publishing it, or went on to do different things. Yet when I was in my twenties, I did see a good deal of poets like John Hughes; and his poetry, along with poetry being

written by others such as Kevin Smith, Andrew Elliott and Damian Gorman, then (just a little younger) Martin Mooney and a couple of others, formed part of what you might call a poetic 'generation' in Ulster, with its own sense of style. All that went off the radar in the course of the 1990s, so that when this 'post-ceasefire generation' you're talking about started to get itself noticed, it looked like there had been nothing between it and Carson, McGuckian, and co. Not true, strictly speaking; though I very much doubt whether any student essays get marked down for making the error.

Does getting this chronology right matter all that much, do you think?

Well, that's essentially a question of the fine print in literary history, isn't it? And it doesn't strike me as at all worth complaining about. As to your question, though, I have no idea about what it would mean for my 'experience' to be 'overlooked'; if my poetry has been 'overlooked' – so what? All published poetry takes the risk of never being read, and I'm not going to be jumping up and down, waving a book in the air, and saying 'You really need to read this!' Of course, I like to think that maybe I'm worth reading, if you're in the mood to read this kind of thing; and enough people I respect as readers have told me they enjoy my poems. That's plenty for anyone, surely? It's hard not to sound po-faced, holy, or mad saying this, but I do feel that a poet's audience is only partly a contemporary one: he or she has to write in a way that is likely to incur neither the ridicule of future generations, nor the reproach of generations in the past. A lot of poets getting published and praised these days ought to worry on that score, and the best they can hope for is that, for all their prizes and honours, those bigger audiences will prove willing to overlook them. I'm sure they will.

What was the first poetry book you bought, or the first collection too, if different? And what was the first single or LP? (Which was more important?)

The first book of contemporary poetry – not exactly one I bought, but one I asked for as a birthday present at the age of fifteen – was Heaney's *North*. Before that, I was buying the odd book and anthology of older poetry, so was already switched on, if you like, as far as poetry was concerned: I had read a lot of Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and the like quite early – too early, maybe. But the Heaney book was a revelation, and changed everything, so that within a year I was getting my hands on all kinds of contemporary stuff – especially Mahon, Longley, Larkin, things like Muldoon's *Mules*, and absorbing it all in that slightly fixated, teenage way, along with Yeats, Eliot, Auden, Graves. A lot of people have exactly this experience with music, don't they? And I had that too, if a little earlier. But as for your first single/LP question, I think it's reasonable to show you mine only if you'll show me yours...

First single: Olivia Newton-John, 'Hopelessly Devoted to You' (in my defence, I was eight); first LP, Queen's A Night at the Opera.

I suppose I really have to match your bravery now? OK: first single I bought for myself was 'Sugar Sugar' by The Archies – not even a real band, cartoon characters! First album (£2.25, saved up very slowly) was David Bowie's 'Diamond Dogs'. There.

Would it ever occur to you to edit your own Wikipedia entry? (I ask this because it's entirely clear you don't at the moment, unlike a number of poets and critics!). Have you any views on the effect social networking and new media might be having on the poetry 'scene'?

I know very little indeed about all this. I have virtually no technical competence at all. I dabble, though, as many people do; and on the whole I've found that social media are good sources of information – well, of gossip at least – and offer useful ways of keeping up to date with some things. Poets on Facebook amuse me, I must say: something in the medium itself encourages narcissistic display, doesn't it? And so many poets are just waiting to show themselves in all their glory, with a gaggle of fans (sorry, 'friends') racing to 'Like' their every inane remark. It's all a kind of air-kissing, really, and about as sincere. 'Another sestina written today: phew!' announces Mr. Lookatme, published poet. 'LIKE!' says Billy Wannabee. 'LOVE!' says Shirley Meetoo. And all these weird words, like 'Yay!', that people feel themselves obliged to use... To be honest, I think too much time spent on the social media does damage to one's view of human nature, so I'd advise keeping it down to a bare – if entertaining – minimum.

How do you balance creative and critical writing? How do they inform each other (in Auden's 'read me' sense, or in other ways?), or is this the separation of church and state?

They inform one another, undoubtedly – though not usually in any very straightforward or obvious ways. I find it very difficult to do both at once, so to speak, which causes trouble with deadlines and the like from time to time. As to separation: yes, there's a line that mustn't be crossed. Roughly, it's this – critical writing can't set any agendas for creative writing. You don't say, for example, 'Well, I'm getting along very well with this book about poetic monologues, it's time I wrote a few poetic monologues of my own to back up the theory'. Certain discoveries – or difficulties – encountered in the course of writing poems can, though, legitimately suggest areas of possible critical concentration without devaluing the results.

What do you think the effect might be of the increasing presence of 'creative writing' as a discipline in our universities?

I teach the composition of poetry from time to time – in my own way, which is often drily technical, and strictly on a non-for-credit basis. I think it's indecent to discuss inspiration, motivation, meaning; and frankly a little coarse to talk to a class about things like publishing. I certainly don't 'teach' creativity, or offer to put anyone on the inside track to a career in writing. Everything about 'creative writing' fills me with foreboding. Leaving aside the damage it will probably do to poetry – not so serious, because poetry has a thousand ways of inflicting damage on itself, and a thousand ways of surviving – it is certainly deleterious to the academic study of literature. At best, it is parasitic on that discipline; at worst, a determined and deadly rival to it. 'Creative writing' in the academy has the growth-logic of a fungus; once an English department has it, it will get more of it, and then more and more. In the end, the scholars will have to acknowledge their inferiority to the 'practitioners' – even

though a single true scholar can be worth a hundred ‘published poets’ in terms of intellectual distinction and significance. To be part of a discipline, you must study something, know what it is and why it is that; not ‘workshop’ it for no better reason than that it happens to be there. This is not a popular view, you won’t be surprised to hear. Though I think that, when the economic bubble of the creative writing degree finally bursts – and it will – the logic of having creative writing growing all over departments of English will not look so strong. I daresay when it’s gone, a few people will miss it for a year or two. But not much.

A few years ago you edited MacNeice’s Collected Poems, a poet who said the ‘middle stretch’ could be bad for poets. How does it feel to have a Collected Poems out, even before the ‘middle stretch’ might be said to loom?

No, no; I’m middle-aged – happy to be outed as such – and I’ve been writing poetry in a serious way for, what, thirty-five years? If I’m not on the middle stretch now, we should all be alarmed. And when MacNeice was my age, he was five years from death, and coming out of that ‘middle stretch’ of his, in fact. I’ve always been on my guard against writing too much – though I’ve often wished I could write more poems, of course – so any sudden and inexplicable burst of fluency will be treated by me with grave suspicion. As it happens, I have been writing more poetry over the past four or five years than I would have been doing before, but I don’t think it’s overly flabby.

A *Collected Poems* now does seem a bit early, as you say, though. On the other hand, it allows me to put those first five books in one compartment, and start again – fresh, as each new book should start, ideally. I have only the shadowiest notions of the next things, but it’s possible another book is taking shape at present; that is, I’m at that stage where there are enough new poems for around a third of a volume, and I’m still waiting to see what the character of that volume will be. I think if I were announcing the conception of a long poem in Spenserian stanzas called *The Wrongs I Have Suffered*, whose governing metaphors all related to crop-rotation in North Down, sexual fantasy, and the Large Hadron Collider, it would be time to start talking seriously about ‘middle stretch’ problems.

MacNeice is obviously a poet close to your heart. Also Yeats. And I see some Gravesian ‘tics’ in your writing too – the measured tone, the formal restraint, yet the sometimes sinister suggestion of darker, more Dionysian depths. Self-identifying influences is a tricky business, but who do you feel most drawn too as precursors too/influences on, your own writing?

I’d be glad to think you could see influence from Graves – it’s there, no question, and he has always been a favourite poet of mine. Often, though, writing poetry is a question of avoiding influences, of showing some powerful presences the door, when need be. Some poets are, in that sense, impossible house guests; others almost too well-mannered, to the extent that they cramp your own style. However – I’m going to flog this metaphor a bit longer – it’s important that a poet should keep open house, as far as possible, and be in a position to take advantage of what the occasional unexpected guest may bring. Perhaps I find that just a bit harder nowadays – but I’m quite sure this is a sign of age and weariness, and not of increasing poetic wisdom.

Too many contemporary poets seem to have difficulty managing Muldoonian influence, yet it's not something evident in your poems at all really, despite that fact that he's surely, in the Belfast of the 1980s, the poet most immediately behind you and over your shoulder? Or wasn't he?

Oh he was, yes. Actually, for a time, I'm ashamed to confess that I was likely to be the poet over his shoulder, in a literal sense: I didn't actually *stalk* him, but I let no opportunity of being in his company pass. Paul's manners are legendary, but I'm lost in admiration, now, for his affable restraint at that time: it must have seemed as if he couldn't saunter down Botanic Avenue without bumping into me, and being sidelined into the nearest pub. Whatever the case, I did most definitely learn a lot from him in those years; if it wasn't so much a matter of technical learning (though I'm not entirely sure – I think I did imitate some aspects of his poetry), it was a case of absorbing a certain attitude, a predisposition to openness in an aesthetic sense, or an avoidance of the too obviously final and decided in poems. By the time Paul was having a major impact on British and Irish poetry – the 1990s – , when figures you could properly call imitators were starting to pop up and be given prizes, I had moved on somewhere else, both poetically and physically. But I owed him a great deal – I would say I still do.

There were other people around too, of course.

In the early 1980s I was very lucky to see a lot of several writers in Belfast, and to learn from them more than I realised I was learning at the time. I remember feeling slightly overawed by Michael Longley, who became a friend rather later on, but being excited, and in a way set on my path, by people like Muldoon, Frank Ormsby, John Morrow and Ciaran Carson. I probably said very little – anything I had to say in those days would have been embarrassing nonsense – but I listened, and soaked up more than just the booze (though there was a lot of that, really). Two moments stick in my mind, and remain talismanic, if that doesn't sound ridiculously pretentious. First, at a table in the Wellington Park, being shown by Frank Ormsby the little, yellow-covered pamphlet *Courtyards in Delft*, which Derek Mahon had just published with Gallery; reading the poems, reading some of them again aloud, and realising that this was in every sense the real thing poetically, utterly true, completely musical, and what I wanted somehow to be able to do myself. It's my favourite book of Mahon's to this day. Second, though, an object lesson in what it might take to actually *write* decent poems: Muldoon, Carson, and Morrow in a deep session, discussing the very senior John Hewitt and his vaunted connection to 'well-made' verse, and then the inflicting of sudden death by quotation – 'Craft of verse, indeed,' Carson said, and then quoted with dull rhythmic emphasis: "I see | they've sent | the Brit- | ish arm- | y in": if John Hewitt *crafted* a chair,' – a long, long pause – 'you'd never dare to sit down in it.' Every time I hear somebody earnestly talking about 'craft' in poetry, I'm back at exactly that table in the Eglantine Inn. As places to learn about poetry go, I still think it wasn't the worst.